

# Shared experience and values

**By ALDERMAN FIONA WOOLF CBE**

LORD MAYOR OF THE CITY OF LONDON



**FIONA WOOLF** qualified as a solicitor in 1973 and worked in the corporate and banking fields at Clifford Chance before becoming a partner at CMS Cameron McKenna in 1981. Over the last 20 years she has worked around the globe, advising over 28 governments and the World Bank on Privatisation and Energy Reforms. She served as President of the Law Society of England and Wales from 2006-07 and became the 686th Lord Mayor of London on 8th November 2013.

Ireland and the City of London have a lengthy shared history that underpins our close relationship today.

This history is our inheritance and our inspiration. But history can also leave a complex, many layered legacy that we must work hard to overcome. It was a subject on which Her Majesty The Queen spoke eloquently during her own historic visit to Dublin three years ago. She touched on the importance of forbearance and conciliation, as well as the ability to bow to the past but not be bound by it.

The story of recent years has been one in which these qualities have been shown at their finest by all sides and by all sections of the community. And the City bowed to the past at a dinner last year to celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the Honourable Irish Society, when my predecessor as the Lord Mayor of London sat between the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. An historic occasion, an inspiring image – and an amazing tribute to the value of the patience, forbearance and conciliation of which

Her Majesty spoke during her visit.

That is why I am delighted to be welcoming President Higgins to Guildhall this month. The first State Visit to the UK by an Irish President will build on the momentum of Her Majesty The Queen’s visit to Ireland in May 2011 – which was another first of its kind. These visits are creating history rather than being slavishly bound by it.

Ireland is a very special friend and partner for the UK across a broad range of areas. We cherish the huge contribution made by Irish citizens – totalling 400,000 across the UK – to all walks of life including literature, business and sport. These men and women play an invaluable role in making London the great world city that it is today.

And we also cherish our shared economic goals. It is important to recognise that trade is not a zero sum game. Unlike the Six Nations, we can all win if we work together. The UK and Ireland have a mutually beneficial commercial relationship built on shared experience and values. This partnership can



make a major contribution to driving a sustained and sustainable recovery, whether we are in Dublin or in London, or as we venture together in global markets through joint trade missions. These shared missions can be partnerships to prosperity and success, especially in the emerging economies.

Two-way trade between our countries stands at €1bn per week. The UK accounts for thirty-four per cent of imports to Ireland, while seventeen per cent of all Irish exports go to the UK. Meanwhile, 50 Irish companies from a range of different sectors are listed on the London Exchanges. The importance of this trade partnership is illustrated by the fact that it underpins over 400,000 jobs across our two countries.

We also both advocate an outward-looking European Union that is open to international trade and investment as well as reform. Our leaders are committed to reducing the amount of red tape that restricts business, particularly small and medium enterprises, so that they can take advantage of new markets and opportunities. This agenda – as showcased by the Irish Presidency in 2013 – is crucial for job creation and growth across the continent.

In their Joint Statement in March 2012, the Prime Minister David Cameron and the Taoiseach Enda Kenny looked forward to a decade of closer cooperation. They highlighted that “the relationship between our two countries has never been stronger or more settled, as complex or as important, as it is today.”

I would add that the scope for closer collaboration has never been greater than it is today.

I hope that the visit of President Higgins to the UK will help to take relations to the next level so that we can both prosper. Of course, Dublin and London will compete for some business on the margins but this competition only serves to make us stronger on the international stage. The unique strengths of our two countries complement one another to make both our offers more attractive.

Last year, I shared the grief of ordinary

men and women right across these islands at the death of one of Ireland’s greatest sons and greatest poets, Seamus Heaney. At his funeral mass, one of the City of London’s most recent freemen, Paul Muldoon, spoke movingly of Heaney’s towering contribution to literature – and how his poetry spoke deeply to so many, whatever their link to literature, whatever their political beliefs.

In that oration, Muldoon spoke of Heaney as someone who had “a signal ability to make each of us feel connected, not only to him, but to one another”. It was something on which Heaney touched himself in an essay, “The Government of the Tongue”, in which he envisaged poetry as something that “holds our attention for a space ... as pure concentration, a focus...” It is a noble vision – of how poetry can help us dig into something deep in ourselves – and find there a channel of deeply-rooted connections one with another – individuals, communities, nations – and the partnerships and friendships between nations.

I hope President Higgins’ visit to Guildhall will have a particular poetry of its own – the rich panoply of ceremonial, colour and conversation. And perhaps it will share the same impulse as Heaney’s poetic vision. It too is about digging deep and finding what the poet called the “taproot” of what we share, and recognising and celebrating it. Let those taproots continue to stretch ever deeper and ever stronger. Let them bind us close together. E

**The scope for closer collaboration between Ireland and the UK has never been greater than it is today**



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